The bacchanal unfolds in a ballroom of a cruise ship adrift in some unspecified international waters. Heavily pregnant Doll and her partner—the Banker—are wed in a rubbed-out copy that nevertheless bears the original contours. In process he embodies the master painter, while wholly transforming his work. His rewriting of Conrad functions in a similar way. The careful study of each paragraph, sentence, and word amounts to a reading so intimate that from a close distance all meaning begins to dissolve.

Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness (1899) is framed as the narration of Charles Marlow, a British sailor who transports ivory along the Congo River during the height of European imperialism. The short novel is wide-

ly studied as a portrayal of the time, and, like the paintings of Gauguin and Rousseau, is considered by many to be a deeply troubling picture of colonialism at the height of its power and exploitation. Having been born in 1857 in Russia, Conrad was Polish by family at a time when, at home, the Grzymala was nonexistent save a collective imagination, Conrad worked for the British merchant marine and successfully applied for British citizenship in 1886. Heart of Darkness therefore depicts British imperialism from a certain distance. In the first pages, as Marlow and his companions relax on the deck of a pleasure ship anchored in the Thanes, he remarks that even London was once among “the dark places of the earth” until the Roman Empire subdued it. The Roman Empire saw its end; within recent history the great Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth had been divided among Russia, Prussia, and Austria; and the British Empire, on which it was said “the sun never sets,” might too come to an end.

DeSouza traces the structure of the book, taking possession of the words. “I have to embody Conrad’s text,” he explains, “by speaking aloud possible rhymes for it as I am writing.” By placing himself in the position of Conrad, he enacts “a similar position of the white (male, straight) body.” He at once performs the closest of readings while at the same time being pointedly unfatherly. But what he creates in Ark of Martyrs is not from that fabled authorial position, but his own specific, contemporary voice. Ark of Martyrs effaces Heart of Darkness even in its structure. Is it deformation, a complete rejection, or indeed a celebration, an ode to a great author? As the words slide over the screen and the audio begins, the viewer will try to follow both stories as they unfold, each framed within a larger story; of Conrad and his Garbo. The written text and the spoken text share a rhythm, but the complexity and dissonance of their content mounts over the course of the video, and the viewer is made aware of her own body as she grapples to balance vision and hearing, reading and listening.

Why would someone who describes himself as “a British American Luso-Indo-African artist and writer,”1 a hybrid subject at every turn, engage Heart of Darkness in this way? Conrad himself—a Pole without Poland—retained a distance from his adopted British identity, and in writing about the British Empire, his alter ego Marlow foreshadows its eventual demise. He presents the “darkness” of the African continent with great ambivalence, oftentimes presenting racism in words spoken by other characters. DeSouza, too, creates a picture of American dominance, but his story takes place in a world going sour, a great empire past its period of delirious at a tituity. From his literary perch on a cruise ship between continents, deSouza shows us a middle class caught up in their own pettiness, the utopianism of the sexual revolution tainted by disease, and a financial bubble that has decidedly burst—leaving this dyspeptic party drifting out to sea.

Notes
1. Correspondence with the curator, March 2014.

Allan deSouza (South Asian, born 1958 in Nairobi, Kenya) is an artist and curator. His work has also been the subject of the recent solo exhibitions Close Quarters and Far Pavilions, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco (2011), and His Masters’ Tools, Fowler Museum, Los Angeles (2010). His work has also been included in numerous group exhibitions including Earth Matters, National Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C. (2013); Dreamlands, Greengrass Pompidou Centre, Paris (2010); and Lens on Life: From Bamako to San Francisco, Museum of the African Diaspora, San Francisco (2007). He earned his BA in Fine Art from the Bath Academy of Art, England in 1983, and his MFA in Photography at the University of California, Los Angeles in 1997, and he currently holds the position of Associate Professor in the Department of Art Practice at University of California, Berkeley. In November 2012, deSouza participated in a Rockefeller Foundation Residency at Bellagio, Italy where he conceptualized and started work on Ark of Martyrs. This is the first public presentation of the project.

Flash! contemporary art series is organized by Joanna Szupinska-Myers, CMP Curator of Exhibitions at the California Museum of Photography, part of UCR ARTSblock.